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ABSTRACT

This paper describes basic skills in terms of three stages of the writing process: drafting, editing, and preservation. During the drafting stage, the basics are those skills and attitudes necessary to release the students' powers of expression. It is basic that they learn how to start and maintain a flow of words and ideas, how to use various techniques to keep their minds occupied with a topic long enough to produce the quantity of draft necessary to work out their private meanings, and how to make use of their own sources, those inside their own heads. Students must learn how to generate comparisons and analogies, and must analyze the language they use to talk about a topic so that they can make their ideas about the topic orderly and clear. Students must learn how to edit so that their thoughts are in a clear, organized, and coherent form. After students have learned to draft and edit, they should become concerned with the problems of preservation, of making a public text. In this stage, correctness is basic. The techniques of word-study are suggested as a method for helping students develop these basic skills. (TS)

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Basic Skills and the Writing Process

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Boston/April 6, 1976

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Before we can be sure what basics we need to get back t-, we should recognize that the process of writing moves through a sequence of stages. To be successful in the total process, students must master skills that differ markedly from one stage to another. In the first stage, called drafting, the students simply put down on paper the beginnings of their ideas. They are involved simply in expressing themselves, exploring what is inside them, and getting it outside them--in any form. It may come out in telegraphic notes to themselves. It may come out as little sketches and diagrams or as disjointed--even 'incorrect'--sentences. At times it may come out as fairly long pieces of fairly smooth and unified prose. But when they are drafting, students are engaged in an act of expression

CS 208 712

that is private. In this stage they are simply trying to exercise their own voices, trying to express themselves, trying to get meanings and questions and feelings that are inside outside.

The second stage of the writing process--called editing--takes what is done in private, and begins to treat it as a social thing--something to be communicated to another person. When editing, students should be concerned with discovering what they have in fact said in their drafting. Drafting is a kind of exploration; editing is a kind of discovery. We tend to think that first you discover something and then explore it, but that is just backwards: First you explore a thing sufficiently to find out what it is not, and only then can you discover what it is. When you draft, you explore your private meanings. When you edit, you discover which of those private meanings to communicate, which to make into social meanings.

In the third stage of the writing process, students make public, and more or less permanent, the meanings they have so far explored and discovered. In this--the stage of preservation--they prepare final public copies of their meanings. Not until now should they be made to worry much over matters of correctness, or else the job of preserving meanings will take precedence over exploring and discovering

them--which would seem to be wrong, basically.

Exploring your private meanings, discovering your social meanings, preserving your public meanings--these are the three stages of the writing process, each with a different set of required skills, and thus, a different set of basics to be gotten back to. The skills, and basics, not only differ from stage to stage, but those required of one stage actually tend to contradict those of the others. Too often--and too early--we have spoken of basics in terms of correctness--correct spelling, punctuation, syntax, and usage--but what is truly and lastingly basic for students depends on where they are within that sequence of stages.

During the first or drafting stage, the basics are those skills and attitudes necessary to release the students' powers of expression. It is basic that they learn how to start and maintain a flow of words and ideas--no matter how muddled, how fuzzy, how rough, how ragged they might at first be. It is basic that they learn how to use various techniques to keep their minds occupied with a topic long enough to produce the quantity of draft necessary to work out their private meanings. They must learn how to use outside sources--like magazines and books and lectures--so ~~; therefore,~~ taking notes and putting them to use is a very basic, much ignored, drafting skill for students. But it is also basic that they be shown how to make

use of their own sources, those inside their own heads. It is basic that they learn how to generate comparisons and analogies. It is basic, too, that they learn how to analyze the language they use to talk about a topic, so they can make more orderly and clear the ideas about the topic that they already have in their minds. This kind of analysis is very important because the language students use to speak and write about a topic preserves all the distinctions and relationships that they can see within it. Their own language always contains more distinctions and more complex relationships than they are immediately and consciously aware of. But they can make themselves more aware of these relationships and distinctions through certain kinds of word-study, like analyzing the synonymy, antonymy, and polysemy in key terms in their earliest draft.

Of the many kinds of word-study available, we might consider just one: the analysis of polysemy as a way to help students start drafting on a dusty old topic like "love." The American Heritage Dictionary gives six different definitions of love that most students would already be familiar with. Students can use these definitions to begin to order and clarify distinctions and connections they already have in mind:

"How are these six different loves the same?

> How are they different? Which ones are most appropriate to my discussion? Why them, and not the others? How can this one word mean six different things? What are the connections among the six? Which one seems most basic?"

This kind of word-study leads to a clearer, more orderly view of what the word love means and how it can be used. And, assuming they remember to jot down ideas as they think through the questions posed by the definitions, students who use such a technique will begin immediately to produce good draft.

Once students have begun to master some drafting skills, the basics for them become the skills needed in the second, or editing, stage. One basic of editing is to discover exactly what there is in those private explorations that should be made social. Students should be taught to identify the recurrent topics in their draft and to condense and summarize their important themes. They must learn how to edit rough draft so that the thought it embodies is given a clear, organized, and coherent form. Word-study that makes use of the dictionary, plus students' own intuition of their language, can be useful here again, for much of the job of getting editorial control over one's own meanings involves getting control over recurrent terms in one's draft:

> "Do any of these terms seem to be synonyms, or near-synonyms? If so, do I have one topic that I'm calling by different names, or do I actually have different topics? Does this term used here mean the same thing that it means over there, or am I shifting topics slightly while keeping the same name? Do any of these key terms seem to be opposites?

This kind of word-study during the editing stage can help students get control of their language, help them see the patterns that are there in their draft, help them see places where their thinking is being muddied by false synonymy and equivocation.

Not until students have mastered some of the basics of drafting and editing, should they be faced with the problems of preservation, of making a public text. Correctness is not basic during the drafting stage. Indeed, during the private act of expression, a concern for correctness can be a sterile, debilitating distraction. During the second, or editing, stage correctness might be moderately important, though certainly not yet basic. Correctness is really basic only during the making of a permanent and public text. And again, here in this final stage, the techniques of word-study can help students develop those skills that are now basic:

It can lead to a sensitivity for the structure of words that can strengthen spelling skills. And word-study, especially work with etymologies, can teach students much about the connotative aura that surrounds words, which can help them control tone and the last-minute polishing of style.

So again, what is basic for students depends on where they are in the three stages of the writing process. And, it would seem, what is most basic for the teacher to teach are those techniques which, like word-study, cut across the three stages and help students develop their skills as drafters, as editors, and as makers of final copies.